Beyond the credibility of the pollster, there is another, though sometimes overlooked, dimension to the issue of poll accuracy: the potential for polls to manipulate public opinion. The questionnaires used in opinion polls are designed to elicit specific responses, often by framing the questions in a way that aligns with the pollster's views or the desires of the sponsoring organizations. This can lead to a distortion of the actual public opinion, as respondents may be influenced by the order in which questions are asked or by the context provided.

An extreme example of how drastically polls can manipulate public opinion occurred shortly after President Bush's 2004 re-election, when he announced that he would try once again to have Congress pass legislation to permit oil drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). A national poll released by Republican Frank Luntz in January of 2005, on behalf of the Arctic Power interest group, found a public that supported oil drilling in ANWR by a margin of 17 percentage points (51 percent to 34 percent). Yet in direct contradiction, a similar poll conducted by American Research Associates, Inc. from October 13 through 15, 2004, found the public opposed to oil drilling in ANWR, by the exact same margin (55 percent opposed to 38 percent in favor).

It seemed more than coincidental that the poll results happened to comport with the desires of the sponsoring organizations. And a look at the questionnaires shows how easy it was to shape the findings into a desired result. Luntz preceded his question on oil drilling with 13 questions addressing how well the people between elections. That at least was the hope of George W. Bush when he launched “America Speaks” in the early 1930s, and it remains the universal vision of media pollsters today. The question from the beginning of modern polling, however, has always been the same: How well do the polls measure what people are thinking? Election predictions can be checked for accuracy against the electoral results, but there is nothing comparable against which to measure the accuracy of the typical public policy poll. Pollsters pressure them to choose one of the available options. Respondents in turn try to come up with some plausible reason for choosing one answer over another. If they don't have much information about the issue, they pick up cues from the way the question is framed or from other questions in the survey. The net result is that many respondents are influenced by the questionnaires themselves.

An extreme example of how drastically polls can manipulate public opinion occurred shortly after President Bush's re-election, when he announced that he would try once again to have Congress pass legislation to permit oil drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). A national poll released by Republican Frank Luntz in January of 2005, on behalf of the Arctic Power interest group, found a public that supported oil drilling in ANWR by a margin of 17 percentage points (51 percent to 34 percent). Yet in direct contradiction, a similar poll conducted by American Research Associates, Inc. from October 13 through 15, 2004, found the public opposed to oil drilling in ANWR, by the exact same margin (55 percent opposed to 38 percent in favor).

The questionnaires showed how easy it was to shape the findings into a desired result. Luntz preceded his question on oil drilling with 13 questions addressing how well the people between elections. That at least was the hope of George W. Bush when he launched “America Speaks” in the early 1930s, and it remains the universal vision of media pollsters today. The question from the beginning of modern polling, however, has always been the same: How well do the polls measure what people are thinking? Election predictions can be checked for accuracy against the electoral results, but there is nothing comparable against which to measure the accuracy of the typical public policy poll. Pollsters pressure them to choose one of the available options. Respondents in turn try to come up with some plausible reason for choosing one answer over another. If they don't have much information about the issue, they pick up cues from the way the question is framed or from other questions in the survey. The net result is that many respondents are influenced by the questionnaires themselves.
only one question related to the oil industry before the drilling question.

But that one question helped present the issue as an environmental mat-
ter, and in that context a solid majority of the respondents opposed oil
drilling.

A key to understanding how easy it was to manipulate respondents
into giving the desired answers is recognizing that most people had little
knowledge about ANWR. For example, 87 percent of Luntz's respondents,
for example, could not say where the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is located—the same percentage could not accurately
define even one word of the acronym ANWR. In addition, only 8 per-
cent said they knew either a lot or a good deal about the area. Despite this
lack of knowledge, only 7 percent of Zogby's sample and 15 percent of
Luntz's sample declined to offer an opinion. Clearly, information pre-
presented over the course of the interview helped many respondents form
an instantaneous opinion.

Although the contradictory results make it difficult to specify what
the "true" state of public opinion was, there are some useful indica-
tions. Even a biased poll in favor of oil drilling found 34 percent opposed, and a
biased poll opposed to oil drilling found 37 percent in favor. This sug-
gests that a mostly divided public, with a substantial proportion not having a
depth of knowledge, only 7 percent of Zogby's sample and 15 percent of
Luntz's sample declined to offer an opinion. Clearly, information pre-
Presented over the course of the interview helped many respondents form
an instantaneous opinion.

A Gallup poll in March 2005, just a couple of months after the Zogby
and Luntz polls, tried to get at that intensity dimension. The question asked:
"Do you think the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska should or should not be opened up for oil exploration?" People
were opposed 53 percent to 42 percent, with just 5 percent unsure. The
follow-up question asked respondents if they would be upset if what oc-
curred was the opposite of what they had just said they preferred. The
result was that 19 percent of respondents wanted oil drilling and would be
upset if it didn't happen, 45 percent were opposed and would be upset if
it did happen, and 36 percent essentially didn't care. Among those who
Cared, opposition to the proposal was greater than 2 to 1, but there's a
catch. The question was asked after numerous questions on global warm-
ing and on the ability of various government agencies to protect the
environment. In that context, the intense opposition measured by
Gallup among its respondents might well be greater than among the pub-
lie as a whole.

Unlike the other two polls, the Gallup poll on oil drilling in ANWR
was not sponsored by a group with a vested interest in the results. Having

From The Opinion Makers

Looked on that specific Gallup poll myself, I can personally attest to the
fact that we did not intend to bias the results. The poll itself was part of
Gallup's monthly Social Series surveys, which measure public opinion
about various matters regularly. In January of each year, for example, Gallup
devotes a poll to measuring the mood of the country, in February to
public opinion on world affairs, in March to the environment, in April to
the economy, and so on. Because there are so many questions related to
the environment in the March poll, it would be impossible not to ask
some questions after respondents had already heard several about the en-
vironment. Inevitably, the early questions will influence how some re-
spondents answer the later ones. Generally, the more questions on the
environment, the more likely respondents are to give environmentally
Sensitive responses as the interview continues.

The Luntz and Zogby examples illustrate how pollsters are often
trained as guns-for-hire. In each case, the policy question itself was neu-
ral. But the question context of each poll was manipulated to pro-
duce the desired result. Find the right pollster, get the right answer. This
is not to say that on every topic, polls can produce whatever a sponsoring
organization might want. But on topics about which most people know
very little, enormous swings in results can easily be obtained by careful
questionnaire designs.

The Gallup example illustrates what's wrong with most media polls
that purport to measure an objective public opinion. Though it did mea-
sure the intensity of the expressed opinions, it failed in several other areas.
There was no attempt to measure how much people knew about the is-
question, and the question was posed in a forced-choice format. Whether
avoidable or not, the ANWR question was asked after several other ques-
tions about the environment, which clearly biased the answers of respon-
dents who had been unengaged on the issue before the survey. And no
attempt was made to discover why people supported or opposed the oil
drilling. George Gallup wanted his polls to provide a guide for political
leaders, but the results of the Gallup poll in this case were hardly useful for
that purpose....

On January 8, 2008, the date of the New Hampshire primary, media
pollsters suffered their biggest failure in election prediction since the 1948
presidential contest, when the three major scientific polls of the day all
correctly predicted Republican Thomas Dewey to beat incumbent
Democratic president Harry S. Truman. At the time, expectation of a Re-
publican victory was so pervasive, news stories analyzing what a Dewey
administration would look like were being written days before the actual
election.
A similar national consensus emerged in the days just before the New Hampshire primary, when pundits of all stripes across the country were predicting the demise of Hillary Clinton's candidacy in light of eleven different polls forecasting her almost certain defeat on primary day. On average, these polls showed Barack Obama winning with 38 percent to Clinton's 30 percent. Obama's lead varied from 3 percentage points, reported by Franklin Pierce College, to 13 points, reported by both Gallup and Zogby. The stunning final vote count: Clinton won with 39 percent to Obama's 37 percent.

The magnitude of the pollsters' failure was highlighted by ABC's Gary Langer, who referred to it as "New Hampshire's Polling Fiasco," saying that it was "essential" to have a "serious critical look" at those results. "It is simply unprecedented for so many polls to have been so wrong," he wrote. "We need to know why." Langer's ABC News poll and its partner the Washington Post poll conducted a single survey in New Hampshire in early December but wisely avoided polling toward primary day, which meant that their poll results were too far removed to be compared with the vote count. Langer joked online, "What I like best about the final New Hampshire pre-election polls is that I didn't do any of it...."

Langer's call for a serious critical look at other news media's polls was shared by key members of the American Association for Public Opinion Research. Five days after the election, the association's president, Susan Mathiowetz, announced the formation of an ad hoc committee "to evaluate pre-election primary methodology and the sponsorship of a public forum on the issue." After reassuring the public that polls have long been "remarkably accurate," Mathiowetz wrote that, "Sixty years ago the public opinion profession faced a crisis related to the poll predictions of the Truman-Dewey race. The way survey researchers reacted then—work a quick, public effort to identify the causes—played a key role in restoring public confidence and improving research methodology."

Many pollsters and pundits attributed the New Hampshire meltdown to the long-standing problem of "nonresponse"—the increasing difficulty in reaching respondents who are willing to be interviewed. These days, more and more people screen their calls with answering machines and caller ID. Even if pollsters can get through, Americans are increasingly unwilling to participate. The question posed by "New Hampshire Polling Fiasco" was whether pollsters simply hadn't been able to reach enough Clinton supporters—and whether this portended a terrible polling performance for the presidential election campaign.

In my estimation, the main reason the polls were wrong is that they stopped too early. A last-minute television news blitz on Sunday and...
for the population as a whole. However, the authors cautioned that some results as they applied exclusively to young adults were biased because of the cell-phone exclusion. Young people with landlines are more likely to attend church and less likely to drink alcohol or approve of smoking marijuana, for example, than are young people with cell phones only. Still, the authors of the study concluded that overall, the utility of including cell-phone samples with the regular landline samples "appears marginal at least at present."

Two other teams of researchers reached a different conclusion and both argued that overall results applying to the general population would be biased if cell phones are excluded. . . .

On January 14, 2008, Frank Newport of the Gallup Poll announced that as of the beginning of the year, Gallup had added "cell phone interviewing as part of the sample for general population studies." He admitted that it was a "complex and costly modification in methodology," and that Gallup was making the change despite the fact that "a study after study has shown that in general, the effect of excluding from the interview process those who only have cell phones has not seemed to affect the overall marginal results of political studies." So, why did Gallup make such a bold change? Newport didn't say. Mark Blumenthal, founder of pollster.com, however, suggested that the real significance of the change was "symbolic!" And because Gallup is the "granddaddy" of the polling industry, Blumenthal expected the change to have a "big ripple effect on the polling industry" . . .

The power of polls today far exceeds the visions of the early pollsters, who simply hoped that their scientific measurements of the public would enhance the democratic process. But as I've made clear, that power is not always positive. The problem is that media polls today are designed to conceal the truth about the American public, a truth that everybody knows but that journalists and pollsters are reluctant to acknowledge.

Virtually everyone who studies or measures public opinion today recognizes that there is a distinction between what Daniel Katz called "a superficially held view which may be discarded the next moment" and a cherished conviction which will change only under unusual pressure.

The current academic debate focuses mostly on how to differentiate between the two extremes. Some researchers suggest there is a spectrum from non-attitudes to quasi-attitudes to real attitudes. Quasi-attitudes are in the middle of the spectrum, because they signify lightly held views that tend to correlate with other opinions and demographic characteristics but also tend to be quite "labile." The issue is where along this spectrum it makes sense to draw the line between opinion and non-opinion . . .
DAVID MOORE

They like the fake stories about voter preferences years ahead of the election, and the exciting horse race of a fully decided electorate that nevertheless keeps changing its mind. They have become addicted to the fictitious national primary electorate, and entranced by their own illusion of a completely rational, all-knowing, and fully engaged public. Should they be forced to report on the real public, a more prosaic public of which large segments are minimally informed or disengaged or have opinions that are ambiguous or tentative, journalists might lose their obsessive fascination with polls. That could happen to some extent, though I doubt even polls that told the unvarnished truth about the public would lose their journalistic appeal completely. But even if pollsters believed that a reformed polling system would cause the news media to rely less often on poll reports, that's no argument for pollsters to continue pumping up false numbers to satisfy the press's unrealistic expectations.

I'm hopeful, if not wildly optimistic, that we are witnessing a historical phase that will soon pass, and that a more responsible approach to measuring public opinion lies in the not-too-distant future. Widespread dissatisfaction with polls can only increase as their dismal performance continue. Eventually, the many conflicting and nonsensical results should shame pollsters and the news media into reform. Only if that happens will polls achieve their ideal role in the democratic process—telling the truth about the public, warts and all.

PART ELEVEN

Interest Groups